

Arte, Individuo y Sociedad

ISSN: 1131-5598

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/ARIS.49201>EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Artistic Talent and Sensibility: The Dramatic Uses of Art in Woody Allen's Creation of Characters

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Recibido: 22 de mayo de 2015 / Aceptado: 15 de noviembre de 2016

Abstract. Art plays a key role in the lives of Woody Allen's film characters. Many of them are writers, filmmakers or musicians; others, although not artists themselves, display a keen sensibility to appreciate art. The purpose of this article is to explore how this characterization trait significantly determines the nature of the characters, the ways in which they interact with each other, and even the fate they deserve within the plot. Art, in its many different manifestations, helps these characters infuse their lives with a boundless vitality, at the same time that it becomes a source of beauty and refuge. Furthermore, art plays a vital role in shaping romantic relationships as well as in enabling characters to achieve self-knowledge, both of which come close to the idea of happiness in Woody Allen's poetic universe. At the same time, together with this recognition of the redeeming potential of art, a poetic punishment is inflicted frequently in Allen's films on the characters that approach art with spurious intentions, as well as a stern warning of the vital unhappiness to which its enshrinement leads.

Keywords: Woody Allen; characters; artistic talent, art and authenticity; art and romantic relationships.

[es] Talento y sensibilidad artística: los usos dramáticos del arte en la creación de personajes de Woody Allen

Resumen. El arte ocupa un lugar central en la biografía de los personajes de Woody Allen. Muchos de ellos son escritores, cineastas o músicos, y otros tantos, sin ser artistas, tienen una rica sensibilidad para apreciar el arte. El propósito de este artículo es analizar cómo este rasgo de caracterización determina la naturaleza de los personajes, el modo en que se relacionan e incluso el destino que merecen en la trama. El arte, en sus muy diversas manifestaciones, ayuda a estos personajes a infundir en sus vidas una gran vitalidad, al mismo tiempo que se convierte en una fuente de belleza y refugio. Además, el arte desempeña un rol crucial tanto en la configuración de las relaciones románticas como en la adquisición de un conocimiento de sí mismo, facetas ambas que se acercan a la noción de felicidad en el universo poético de Allen. Junto al reconocimiento de estas posibilidades redentoras del arte, en sus películas abunda el castigo poético a los personajes que se acercan al arte con intenciones espurias así como una advertencia de la infelicidad vital a la que conduce su sacralización.

Palabras clave: Woody Allen; arte, talento artístico; arte y autenticidad; arte y relaciones románticas.

Sumario. 1. Introduction. 2. Art as a Dionysian Force. 3. Art as Refuge. 4. The Closest Accomplice of Romance. 5. Art and Authenticity. 6. Conclusion. 7. References.

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Cómo citar: Echart, P. (2017) Artistic Talent and Sensibility: The Dramatic Uses of Art in Woody Allen's Creation of Characters. *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad* 29(1) 57-70.

1. Introduction

The close bond between character and different forms of art comprises an authorial touchstone of Woody Allen's oeuvre. Characters in his films often engage in, reflect on, or talk about music, painting, film, and other art forms. Hence, his stories are markedly intertextual, although tracing such enriched meaning is not the purpose of this article, as neither is the task of tracing hypothetical autobiographical considerations derived from the fact that Allen is himself an artist of multiple facets (filmmaker, musician, writer, comedian). The focus here is to explore the main functions attributed to art as part of the dramatic construction of character. If character identity is a combination of physiological, sociological and psychological aspects (Egri, 1960: 32-43), artistic talent and sensibility constitute defining features of the idiosyncratic nature of the characters and the type of relationships that arise between them in the films of Woody Allen.

In order to analyze this issue, the article has been arranged in four sections. First, a context is provided for the object of analysis within Allen's poetics, in which existential pessimism coexists with an equally powerful vitality. Allen reclaims an exaltation of emotions as a means to enjoy life in fullness, and art constitutes a relevant vector within this premise. Secondly, the analysis focuses on the ways in which contact with art becomes a valuable asset for characters who unfold as players on the imperfect stage of reality. Art becomes a cathartic balsam that enables them to recover from the painful blows life holds in store for them. The experience of art transcends its value of escapism, inasmuch it becomes for the characters a vital necessity. Or, could the male protagonists of *Annie Hall* (1977), *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999) or Cecilia in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) face their respective lives without the gift of musical and literary talent, and the refuge of cinematic fantasy? Next, the article deals with how romantic relationships arise in situations where art plays a prominent role. This moment marks the beginning of intimacy, and the degree to which the characters' artistic tastes are attuned with one another functions as a reliable indicator of the couple's overall compatibility. Art facilitates the meeting of "kindred souls" in an authorial world in which love is, paradoxically, both a fleeting experience or feeling and an indispensable cornerstone in order to achieve a fulfilling life. In the last section, art is analyzed as a driving force that fosters the processes of personal self-discovery. The characters' attitude of openness to artists and artworks enables them to engage new worlds of values and undertake therapeutic processes of self-recognition. The significance attributed to the archetype of the mentor is relevant here, as are the risks of corruption that threaten the talent for art.

2. Art as a Dionysian Force

Woody Allen has contributed to decrease the redemptive aspirations of art in his films. He has said that art is “entertainment for intellectuals,” an experience that provides distraction and amusement, and whose function is to postpone one’s encounter with “the horrors of reality” (Detmer, 2013: 469, 467). Along the same lines, Höslé (2002: 98) undercuts its transformative potential by ultimately considering it a form of escapism, although he recognizes in art, such as in religion or morality, a means to attempt to “fill the void” with which the contemporary man is faced. Moreover, in his insightful analysis, Bailey explores (2001: 113) “Allen’s skepticism toward the promises of artistic rendering” and develops an essentially pessimistic argumentation about the artistic condition, by observing how, ordinarily, it becomes a condemnation for whoever experiences it.

These assessments find their foundation in a filmography that toys with nihilism and which falls within the parameters of existentialism, and which Detmer (2013: 460-469) has synthesized in seven “philosophical claims”: 1) life is meaningless; 2) there is no God; 3) death is inevitable, irrevocable and horrible; 4) there is no cosmic justice; 5) human existence is miserable; 6) the fact that there is no God, afterlife, or cosmic justice makes it all the more necessary for us to meet our moral obligations, and to lead lives of authenticity and integrity; 7) art is overrated and has no social value.

In accordance with this worldview, it is logical that art should not be considered as an absolute value, an alternative capable of exorcizing the absence of God or the total devastation which supposes the fact of death. Indeed, any redemptive potential from art falls within the limits of this framework of immanent thinking. But, turning around Detmer’s last proposition, my assertion is that the relevance he attributes to art cannot be underrated; and that, while it may lack social meaning, it does have a personal meaning: art will not be able to change the cruelty of the world, but that does not mean it cannot play a notable role in the internal evolution and fate of the characters.

At this point, it seems necessary to point out that, in Allen’s filmography, pessimism coexists with a definite willingness to live, made manifest through characters who, as Sandy Bates points in *Stardust Memories* (1980), would give anything to stay alive. For each character committing suicide before the senselessness of the world, there are many others who endeavor to live with intensity; and who attempt to do so in an authentic and upright manner, because in Allen’s worldview, it does make a difference whether one lives in a certain way or another.

This willingness to live is channeled through the empathy aroused by his dionysian characters. Regardless of the moral value in their behavior, they embrace *eros* and guide their lives by irrationality, trusting their actions to the dictates of their feelings, passions, impulses, and intuition (Luque, 2005: 54-55). Be it from the creative act or from the aesthetic reception, the artistic experience finds a glad anchoring in this layout. That is why the filmmaker shows sympathy for those characters who approach art (in its widest array of expressions) in a genuine manner, that is, those who feel it as a deep emotional experience.

Allen finds support in stark dichotomies so as to brandish his universe of values. Thus, there is a vivid dividing line between characters with a romantic and passionate worldview and other, more small-minded people whose engagement with the world

is conditioned by prosaic criteria and limited ambitions. Artists take part in the former category, whereas the latter is personified by doctors or dentists – *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), *Blue Jasmine* (2013) –, businesspeople – *Midnight in Paris* (2011) –, TV executives – *Manhattan* (1979), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) –, and so many academics and pseudo-intellectuals who approach art in a fraudulent way.

Allen makes use of the spaces characters inhabit to abound in this twofold framework. In *Midnight in Paris* and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), he articulates this viewpoint through a personal re-reading of a recurring theme in Anglo-American literature before the Great War: the contrast between a bourgeois, materialistic United States and a Europe of culture and art. In both of them, art becomes an ally to underwrite a *carpe diem* outlook on life. In *Midnight in Paris*, the main character runs away from the orderly and superficial future that awaits him in the United States, and through a double-dip experience of time travel in which he enters the so-called golden ages of contemporary art, he encounters a bohemian atmosphere that will help him take a leap of quality in regard to his artistic aspirations and his way of coping with life.

In *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, two American tourists (Vicky and Cristina) find themselves involved in a sensual experience upon coming in contact with the artistically-rich European scene. The plot depicts a vision of the United States as a “materialistic and puritan” nation, in dramatic contrast to Europe, home to authentic individuals who live free of social restrictions and happily immersed in the joy of the present moment. Juan Antonio is a radical incarnation of the uninhibited and hedonistic artist, the character who gives himself to art and to romantic and sexual relationships as a means to counterbalancing a life that is, in his own words, short, dull, and full of pain. The narrative sympathy for such values is reaffirmed in his father: an aged poet who has erotic dreams about his son’s former partner. The encounter with Juan Antonio will enable Cristina to develop a creative talent as a photographer, and offers Vicky a glimpse of the limitations of the married life in which she seems to be already ensnared.

The criteria by which Vicky and Cristina rule their love lives – reason vs. passion – would find a mirroring image in the internal conflict of Marion, in *Another Woman* (1988): a paradigmatic example of the way art and feeling, on the one hand, and intellectual reason on the other, are counterpointed. The film comprises a retrospective account of the existential barrenness of a mature woman who sacrificed her true passions for the sake of a well-balanced life. In her professional life, Marion turned her back on her passion for painting (art), deciding instead to devote herself to the study of German philosophy in academia (reason). The choice she made in her love life was even more absolute: rather than the true love she felt for a writer whom she was not reckless enough to pursue, Marion chose to marry a cardiologist, which sounds a note of irony in the story because he is a “heartless” man whose approach to human relationships is numbingly cold, a quality that marks the people and relationships closest to Marion.

In brief, Allen’s sympathy leans toward characters who, with art’s help, let themselves be carried away by their emotions; in so doing, they lead a life open to impulses, lack of balance, and even suffering, while at the same time sanctioned as rich, intense, and authentic.

3. Art as Refuge

For Woody Allen's characters, the creation and appreciation of art amount to one of the greatest sources of satisfaction that life may afford. A recurrent motif in his films is the presentation of art as a field that allows characters to seek refuge from the heartaches of life. In this sense, art would perform an escapist function in their lives, a function that is, however, transcended inasmuch their aesthetic experience becomes a vital necessity. Some even may find the meaning of their lives in it.

His films remain faithful to the kind of things which, according to Isaac in *Manhattan*, make life worthwhile: the beauty of a woman's face, good food and, above all, a series of artistic milestones such as Groucho Marx and the Swedish movies, *Sentimental Education* by Gustave Flaubert, Paul Cézanne's "incredible apples and pears," and the music of Mozart, Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong. Of the eleven items outlined by Isaac, it is meaningful to find that eight of them belong to the world of art and that the remaining three "are all things the appreciation of which would likely be primarily aesthetic" (Detmer, 2013: 467). A year later, as though it were a practical implementation of Isaac's list, the tormented protagonist of *Stardust Memories* recalls how he found meaning in his life thanks to a delightful spring scene in which he observes the beauty of his lover to a soundtrack by Armstrong. The question about why living life is worth it is answered in both cases with an affirmation of aesthetic enjoyment, an ascertainment that can be extrapolated to the whole of Allen's filmography. In his worldview, what make the characters' lives meaningful are the experiences of romantic and aesthetic nature, whose pleasure makes up for the ugliness of life.

The enjoyment of aesthetic experiences can be provided for by artists in "high culture" as well as by popular creators and entertainers, even by those that are to be found in the most negligible categories of public recognition. To the latter ones, Allen pays tribute in films such as *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) and *Shadows and Fog* (1991). The talent agent Danny Rose receives Allen's most compassionate gaze for his altruistic dedication to a series of marginal artists that brighten up people's lives through their humble talents (which already gives art, at least, a modest degree of social meaning.) In *Shadows and Fog*, where the circus represents "an allegorical embodiment of the realm of fantasy and art" (Bailey, 2001: 156), a clown reclaims his responsibility towards making people laugh and to "make them forget their sad lives"; and when the character played by Allen himself decides to run away with the circus, his decision reinforces the assertion of a universal need for fantasy.

This therapeutic function of aesthetic experience finds in the film theater at least two stellar moments. In *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), the comic pleasure that Mickey experiences while watching Marx Brother's *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933) provides him with an epiphany by which he exorcizes his existential demons. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in turn, the necessity to overcome the ugliness of reality and take refuge in a more exciting world finds its most concise expression, as Bailey (2001: 152) expresses accurately:

Cecilia's reversion to embracing the erotic union epiphanized by the choreography and lyrics of "Cheek to Cheek" is pure psychic necessity, because only these images of glamour, grace, and erotic concord can reconcile her to returning to her life (...). These images are the only happiness she knows how to seek; she needs them "like she needs the air" because without them, she would suffocate.

The creative activity and the contemplation of the artwork share this condition of necessary refuge. Films such as *Annie Hall*, *Deconstructing Harry* and *Sweet and Lowdown* repeat the narrative pattern of a series of protagonists who culminate their experiences exorcizing, thanks to art, the painful failures that have just taken place in their lives. The three films show "the relationship between the chaos of experience and the stabilizing, controlling capacities of aesthetic rendering" (Bailey, 2001: 5). In the first one, Alvy experiences the cathartic power of art as he writes a play that re-enacts his romance with Annie; thanks to the rhetorical possibilities of fiction (i.e. the happy ending), Alvy amends the rupture in his real life. Thus, "though never fully able to heal any wounds, art is portrayed here as capable of relieving much of the discomforts of reality" (Bickley, 2001: 138). Art also makes the pains of life bearable for Emmet Ray in *Sweet and Lowdown*. The story underscores the contrast between the musician's chaotic life and the sense of peace he feels when he plays his guitar. The consoling power of art is also revealed in the ending of *Deconstructing Harry*, when the writer thanks his fictional creations for having provided him with some of the best moments of his life, and he recognizes that writing "in more ways than one saved his life": the perfection he reaches in writing fiction soothes his pathetic personal life.

However, the creative act does not have an absolute value, as the two last aforementioned films illustrate well. Rather, they insist on claims already set forth in *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994). On the one hand, Allen blasts away the artist's aura as a superior being by showing the lack of necessary continuity between the sensibility to create beautiful artworks and the ability to relate to the world and others, between artistic talent and moral behavior (which is something that, despite exceptions such as Mia Farrow's character in *Hannah and her Sisters*, can be sharply perceived throughout Allen's work in his merciless portrayal of film and theater actors and performers). On the other hand, as Bailey (2001) claims several times, the films show how the artistic activity turns into pathology when it is not used in life's service. These characters arouse empathy and find a consoling shelter in art, but at the same time receive – as is the case of the gangster in *Bullets Over Broadway* – a poetic punishment. Thus, Emmet will lose the woman that could have made him happy, although from this pain his best songs will emerge. The narcissist exercise of auto-fiction will also have devastating consequences for Harry (since he prioritizes his literary writing over the people he lives with and with whose intimacy he gambles), in the same way that it could have previously happened to characters who, much like Jill – *Manhattan* – and Holly – *Hannah and Her Sisters* –, fell into the same mistake. Emmet and Harry represent comical embodiments of an idea that goes all the way back to Eve in *Interiors* (1978): a character that, paraphrasing Bailey (2001: 76), destroyed human bonds in her struggle to transform the gross materials of human life into artistic perfection. Here lies, then, a thin red line which the artist must never cross: aestheticism, idolatry of art, the privilege of artistic talent over the genuine relationships with persons.

4. The Closest Accomplice of Romance

Far from falling into depression upon considering how miserable human life is, the protagonists of Woody Allen decidedly pursue the fulfillment promised by romantic love. This unceasing quest is probably the main identity trait of his films, which frame romance as the most meaningful experience. One that finds in art an excellent ally.

Given the ability of art to amplify emotions and feelings, one of its most usual dramatic purposes is to function as a spur to passion. With great frequency, music is the artistic discipline chosen to perform this role. Thus, Vicky becomes inebriated by an environment filled with the sounds of a Spanish guitar. As a consequence, she takes down her rational barriers and precipitates into infidelity with an epicurean artist whom she had loathed so much just a few hours earlier: the last thing she would have wanted or even imagined in any other circumstances. In *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* (2010), guitar music (a melody composed by Boccherini) is also the catalyst of the love affair between an untalented writer and a young musicologist, a romance that rhymes with other similar relationships in *Sleeper* (1973), *Stardust Memories* and *Melinda and Melinda*, where male characters are attracted to women who are musically talented. In *Blue Jasmine*, the protagonist recalls how she met her husband to the beat of the popular ballad *Blue Moon*, and again in *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, the writer's wife succumbs to the seduction of her boss after they attend the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*. In other films, this catalyzer of passion is attributed to other forms of art. Thus, in *Cassandra's Dream* (2007), Ian is bewitched by an actress he sees on stage, and the romance between Gabe and his student Rain in *Husbands and Wives* (1992) springs from their conversations about literature and writing.

The dramatic role of art in romance is sometimes depicted as a chance event: in *Alice* (1990), for instance, Alice and Joe meet for the first time when he returns a book by Edna Millay she had dropped. Likewise, in the comic strand in *Melinda and Melinda*, the main character meets and falls in love with a pianist moving house, when she plays the piano she comes across in the street. On other occasions, in contrast, art is used deliberately as a means of seduction, by characters that are mindful of its capacity to stir up emotions. Such is the situation in both *Hannah and Her Sisters* and in *September* (1987). In the former, Lee becomes aware of her brother-in-law's feelings for her when he gives her a collection of E. E. Cummings's poetry as a gift; through the poem *Somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond*, Elliot declares his love for her in veiled way. Their first kiss is also framed by Cummings's poetry, along with Bach's diegetic music and the viewing of a series of nude portraits of Lee. In *September*, Peter gives Lane an Art Tatum record; the music erodes her will, leading her to cheat on her husband and to betray her best friend. In the face of the difficulties that muddle their adulterous liaison, Peter fantasizes that they run away to Paris, the city in which Allen's characters – see also *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, *Hollywood Ending* (2002), *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) or *Midnight in Paris* – find the perfect embodiment of an idyllic space, one that encompasses beauty, fantasy, the greatness of art and the splendor of true romance.

In the comings and goings between Allen's couples, shared artistic experiences and tastes function as a powerful instigator of romance, and at the same time as a guideline to distinguish between characters that match each other and those who

are unavoidably destined to fail as romantic partners (in its most pessimistic view, Allen would state that every couple is destined to fail with the passing of time, no matter how much of a common aesthetic ground they share, as *Anything Else* [2003] illustrates). So, in the dramatic strand in *Melinda and Melinda*, the piano teacher, portrayed as a woman who is transported by the music of Mahler, leaves her husband (an actor who seems more interested in success than in his artistic vocation) for a composer whose surname – Moonsong – reveals his romantic and sensitive nature. That the first bond that emerges between them is emotional is no coincidence: they connect when they play a duet together on the piano, as if they would display their inner selves through the music. As it happens first to Melinda, and later to Laurel when she encounters him, art predisposes the characters to share intimacy itself, either because it enables them to express particular emotions or because they feel comfortable alluding to deeply-felt concerns. After attending a recital of pieces composed by Bartok, Moonsong says: “I can see a person’s soul by their intonation on an instrument.” And it is true: after asking him what he saw in her soul, Laurel admits that his description is as precise as any that might be given by a psychiatrist (and given, too, in less time). Thus, music is depicted as a mode of knowledge, a window on the character’s soul.

In *Husbands and Wives*, Liam Neeson’s character has romantic relationships with two mutual friends. His romance with the woman who does not share his taste for Mahler and the German architect breaks down; however, his love for the woman who shares his interest in the Bohemian composer and in poetry is to last. In the same movie a cultured man has an affair with a jogging instructor: a person who can reinvigorate the physical dimension of a relationship but who, in the end, cannot live in the same world. This incompatibility is signaled in the gag where she is shown to be ignorant of the Shakespearean origin of *Ran* (Akira Kurosawa, 1985). Similarly, the instability of the affair between Dolores and Judah in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is depicted in the scene where she mistakes Schumann for Schubert. For Judah such confusion transcends the comic: the reference to Schumann connotes Dolores’s dangerously precarious psychological state (Fahy, 2001: 83).

Art also serves the purpose of reinforcing woman’s perception of man as someone romantic and therefore, desirable to her eyes. The passionate heroines in Allen’s films are not attracted to the strong masculinity expressed in values such as social success, financial security, or physical beauty, but are rather captivated by men who show refinement and sensitivity – a quality they show largely through their artistic interests and inclinations, and with the emotional reaction they display towards those. Thus, Neeson’s character in *Husbands and Wives* is introduced as a man who can recite W. B. Yeats’s poems at a party and cry. Indeed, for Allen’s female characters, there are few things that can better a man’s impression than to see him cry before an artistic manifestation. This becomes a recurring motif that appears in such films as *Manhattan*, *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. These displays of emotion and of interest towards art can be either sincere or fake. The most obvious case of the latter can be found in *Everyone Says I Love You*, where the male protagonist pretends to share the interests of an art historian so as to seduce her. Besides, this strategy meant to push forward the development of a romance can be eventually employed to characterize the villain in a glamorous way, as it happens in *Scoop* (2006).

The influence of these qualities can be so powerful that female characters may even fall into the pathology of mistaking the real object of their love: *Bullets Over Broadway* and *Deconstructing Harry* illustrate the false illusion that romance depends more on their fascination with an artist's work than with the artist as a person. In such manner, one can find here a new assertion of the limits of the artistic condition, which is denaturalized when it becomes sacred.

5. Art and Authenticity

The quest for authenticity is a constant in Allen's filmography: his movies are peppered with characters in search of a more genuine life, which they will only achieve if they manage to embrace the right values, as established by the story. Often times, this will imply the courage to choose the partner who embodies those values, that is, a character full of vitality who has a genuine experience with a certain form of art. Otherwise, what awaits these characters is a sterile life, as is the case of Marion (*Another Woman*), Alice (*Alice*), and Vicky (*Vicky Cristina Barcelona*).

Truly, entering in contact with art constitutes an important factor to stir up a change of values. Art, as Yale puts it in *Manhattan*, allows characters to "get in touch with feelings you did not know you had." With the superficial traits of a minor character, Marietta illustrates this in *Whatever Works* (2009): the discovery of her talent for photography becomes the cornerstone of a personal transformation by means of which she leaves behind a set of moral and ideological values that are depicted as repressive (those of the Republican Party), and engages with a new world of values presented as authentic and progressive. In this change, art replaces religion (portrayed as false) as the ground of stability and personal fulfillment.

Sometimes, the personal destiny of the protagonists is settled in the dialogue that they maintain with the artistic oeuvre of certain totems of art and culture, and the disposition that these characters express to let be guided by them or not. So, the criminal spiral of Chris in *Match Point* (2005) seems to be a consequence of his eagerness to refuse the morality proposed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *Crime and Punishment*. By contrast, Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry and Gustav Klimt's painting play a therapeutic role in the process of self-discovery that Marion goes through; two poems, *The Panther* and *The Archaic Torso of Apollo*, prove especially influential: in the first, Marion sees a death that "approaches inexorably as she wastes her life in sterile occupations" (Oria, 2007: 174), while at the same time the poem traces a direct analogy with her own life, "the sign of a great will which has become numbed" (Gordon, 2004: 239); the second poem commands her to act: "You must change your life." To a certain extent, this change is made possible too by a copy of *Hope* (1903), a painting of Klimt whose presence provides Marion with an opportunity to make up for her mistakes in a vicarious way. Viewing this portrait of a pregnant woman initiates her figurative mother-child relationship with Hope, a young pregnant woman in whose drifting life Marion sees a reflection of her own. Klimt's painting enables Marion to rescue Hope from her distress; that girl and portrait have the same name is no coincidence. Once Marion has acknowledged the serious mistakes she has made in her own life (first and foremost, her decision not to be a mother), she is able to guide the younger woman, to whom she imparts the hopeful meaning of the painting and, as a result, the idea that expecting a baby is also a state of hope. That these two

characters only meet in this deeply intimate sequence of the film and through their experience of a painting (a sort of hall of mirrors) is significant; it enables them to redirect their lives towards new ends: Marion offers Hope her own experience, thus redeeming her own errors; and Hope finds in Marion's words about Klimt's painting consolation for her own sorrows.

When it comes to drawing these shifts in identity, Allen finds support on the archetype of the mentor. A peculiar case is the film *Alice*, one about female metamorphosis in which Allen underscores the value of art as a means (not an end) to reach authenticity: even though Alice will find the meaning of life in humanitarianism, she would have never arrived to it without the help of two mentors: the ghostly figure of her first love, a dead painter that urges her to get to know a musician to whom she is in thrall; and the musician himself, with whom she has an affair and who prompts her literary creativity and reveals to her the pleasures of the great jazz musicians. Alice thus finds the tools to overcome her existential emptiness, to which she was doomed once she stopped cultivating her aesthetic sensitivity upon giving herself to a marriage based on an obscene materialism. In *Midnight in Paris*, Gil will face a similar conflict and will choose the right path thanks to the experiences he shares with his bohemian friends: he will preserve his genuine appreciation for art, he will keep on track to grow as an artist, and he will enjoy a life full of sensual pleasures, all of which starkly contrasts the insensitivity and dullness of the Americans around him (parental figures that, as in *Alice*, drive their children towards comforting but unauthentic lives). In *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, by contrast, Vicky will not dare to embrace the epicurean values of the Spanish painter.

It is more problematic to address the reference of Pygmalion, a kind of mentor present in films such as *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Here, the couples "have a relationship grounded in an older man's intellectual and aesthetic superiority and his ability to convey this wisdom to a younger, impressionable woman" (Lee, 2002: 96), even if it gets to the point where the relationship becomes stifling for her. Here as well, a key part of the shaping of the apprentice's identity is the way in which personal growth enables the practice, appreciation or refinement of some form of art: the symmetrical scenes in Annie's musical performance prove her artistic growth by Alvy's side, and Tracy grows in cinematic culture and fosters an interest in photography thanks to Isaac. This archetype applies to three characters in *Hannah and Her Sisters*: Elliot, Frederick, and Mickey. Out of the three, Frederick is the most suffocating and narcissistic. Similarly to Eve in *Interiors*, Frederick lives isolated within the walls of his apartment, where he struggles to manipulate Lee's feelings so as to keep her by his side.

On the contrary, Mickey is probably the most luminous Pygmalion to be found in Allen's films, and his relationship with Holly evinces the redemptive nature of love (Blake, 1991: 58-66). Obeying the rules of romantic comedy, this couple progresses from dislike to love, and the experience of art is used to measure the degree of mutual understanding. On their first date, Holly shocks Mickey by bringing him to a punk gig; and the tables are turned the very same night: Holly is bored when Mickey brings her along to listen to the music of Cole Porter. To Mickey's mind, this is "a major character flaw, akin to her cocaine dependency" (South, 2004: 127). Such cross purposes, which reflect a total lack of understanding, are overcome through Holly's development as a character: her aesthetic tastes become much more refined. In her endeavor to work in the music world, Holly sings *I'm Old Fashioned* at an audition,

a song that highlights the need to acknowledge an artistic tradition (McCann, 1990: 241). Holly internalizes this idea, as seems clear when she meets Mickey for the first time after their initial, disastrous date. Now she has a *Don Giovanni* recording in her hand. Thus, the story sets out the conditions whereby she may become a good writer and begin a relationship with Mickey, who stands for the authorial voice of the “old fashioned” Allen. At the same time, Mickey’s role is one of benefactor: he gives her the confidence to recognize the value of her own writing, the field in which she finally finds her mode of artistic expression. Fiction is a lifesaver for Holly, enabling her to express her true feelings and experience knowledge of her deepest self (Fernández Labayen, 2005: 96-97). The fertility of this relationship is represented in physical terms by her pregnancy.

Allen’s films state the idea that art is a gift, an innate capacity that cannot be gained through sheer will power. Hence, anyone who lacks such talent should give up trying to achieve it, as does the protagonist of *Bullets Over Broadway*, a playwright who is rewarded by this act of honesty with a stable romantic relationship. But, on the contrary, those who are artistically talented must respect and keep the flame of art burning bright. Making use once again of incompatible alternatives, some of his films reclaim artistic integrity as threatened by corruption through the temptation of money. In *Manhattan*, the harm done to art by a materialistic culture is cited in Isaac’s warning to Mary, whom he tries to encourage to use her talent as a writer of fiction, a talent he believes she is wasting on less important projects (writing books that novelize film storylines) in order to make money. Isaac preaches by example: he resigns from his job in (morally corrupting) television entertainment to write a novel of moral worth. In *Celebrity* (1998), this tension is personified in the writer whose time is torn between writing a film script that he does not mind others revising and changing, and writing a novel he feels would be true to himself. Finally, in *Midnight in Paris*, the (frivolous) screenwriter is likewise supplanted by the literary writer (of personal and profound stories): Gil forswears a comfortable future in Hollywood to follow his dream of being a novelist. Ultimately, “in art, what counts is the courage to do what you think is right” (Lee, 2002: 58).

The temptation of seeing art in commercial terms is also proposed from the point of view of artistic reception. Allen despises the characters who trivialize art by approaching it with this deceitful attitude. In *Midnight in Paris*, the approach to artistic manifestations from the past contrasts the “authentic, enthusiastic, and first-hand artistic appreciation” of Gil with the consumerist’s pleasure of the Americans who buy antiquities with ornamental purposes (Fusco, 2013: 311, 299). In a similar way is depicted a rock musician in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, whose criteria for buying paintings is the size of the canvases. Besides considering art as commerce, there is the narcissistic pretension of bragging about it.

Allen condemns other approaches to art that have an instrumental purpose. This explains his criticism of social climbing in *Melinda and Melinda*: in the film’s dramatic strand, the protagonist’s decision to leave her husband, a failed actor who makes a living in TV commercials, is seen as a poetic punishment for him, who has chosen to cultivate a network of relationships for his own benefit, rather than to nurture his talent. In the film’s comic strand a similar punishment takes place: the socially ambitious role is played by an experimental film director, whose husband leaves her when he finds her in bed with a producer who may finance her film, “The Castration Sonata.”

Lastly, art's corruption finds its most recurring manifestation in the foolish and conceited characters that are incapable of appreciating it as a genuinely emotional experience. Their lack is masked by academic pretexts, which also let through their ignorance in the matter. These figures are toxic because their pretensions might undermine the authentic sensibility to art that others have (Holt, 2004: 91), as *Midnight in Paris* and *Manhattan* show.

Allen's films, then, show that art can help characters find authenticity in a relevant way, at the same time that they do not tolerate the impostures. Art is trivialized when oriented to illegitimate ends, foreign to emotion and to the pleasure that beauty arouses.

6. Conclusion

One of the expressions of the existentialist ethics present in Woody Allen's films consists of the necessary condition that his characters live in a genuine manner. The fact that life is short and painful makes the necessity of making the most of it even more pressing. For this to happen, characters must face their existence in accordance to a set of values that the narrative defends by means of stark dichotomies. On one hand there are the characters who lead their lives according to the dictates of intellectual reason, making them balanced and orderly, but equally tedious and sterile. In contrast with these Apollonian characters, we find on the other hand those towards whom the sense of these fictions leans: those who face their lives from irrationality and who live according to *eros*, to the instinct of life; characters who, as the Liptons find out in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), dare to live with risk and emotion. Their lives will be instable and frequently painful, but in exchange they will also be deeply intense and exciting. These characters will receive the most sublime rewards, the first of which will always be romantic love. Many characters face this dilemma, and what is at stake is to know whether, according to the given values, their lives will be satisfying or not.

The presence of art in Allen's films is as notorious as that of romantic relationships and it is a prominent part of the Dionysian universe reclaimed as authentic. The artistic creators and the audience who undergo genuine aesthetic experiences – that is, those who are capable of taking delight in and be moved by art – find in art a consoling experience before the troubles of life; whatever escapism that might be in it is transcended inasmuch such experience is felt by the characters as something necessary, therapeutic, which gives meaning to their lives and which can even become an epiphany for them.

Besides, art fosters the meaningful relationship par excellence, that is, romance. Very frequently the artistic experiences act as a catalyst of passion, insofar the couple shares a strong emotional situation and is left with a predisposition to intimacy. It is not rare, then, that the artistic taste they share is occasionally employed as a sign of their potential compatibility. About this link between art and romance, male characters show a higher degree of cunning than female ones, and thus they make a deliberate use of their artistic sensibility so as to offer a romantic image of themselves that will make them attractive to females' eyes.

In Allen's worldview, art must be employed in the service of life. Certain female characters experience a fundamental failure when they choose a partner disconnected

from the values associated to art. If this is a female defect, there are some male characters who find themselves afflicted by an opposite flaw: that of idolizing their own talent, thus falling into a lethal narcissism. These male characters will only be left then with the consolation of their art, while the female ones are given occasionally the opportunity to experience a redeeming metamorphosis, made possible largely because of their rediscovery of their connection to art. In the search for authenticity, female characters also find oftentimes the help and support of a mentor, who can be defined in very positive terms or, as it happens with the Pygmalion archetype, in more problematic ones.

Despite these dangers, Allen reclaims art as a gift that entails a series of responsibilities. His films contain many examples of dishonest uses of art, and the characters who manipulate its essence with a mercantile, social-climbing, or snobbish outlook, are poetically punished. On the contrary, when the approach to art is honest, when it is understood as an experience of delight and emotion, the rewards appear by opening the doors to romance and authenticity, the two dimensions where Woody Allen's characters may encounter happiness, however fragile and fleeting it may be.

7. References

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